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## Las Vegas SUN

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# Nevada's gold diggers mucking up the air

## UNR study finds high levels of airborne mercury near mines

**By Lisa Mascaro**

Las Vegas Sun

WASHINGTON - A UNR study being released today says airborne mercury is present around Nevada's gold mines at much higher levels than previously thought - in some cases on par with the nation's dirtiest industrial plants.

Mercury emitted from mines in Northern Nevada is a growing concern for residents in southern Idaho and Utah who are advised to no longer eat certain fish or fowl.

Although the mining industry says that other sources of the pollutant are largely responsible for those high levels, environmentalists contend that much of it is blown in from the closest source - Nevada's mines.

Those same toxins also settle in Nevada.

The UNR report obtained by the Sun was conducted by Glenn C. Miller, a natural resource and environmental science professor, and student Patrick Joyce.

The research provides only a brief snapshot of the pollution levels, but environmentalists said the high concentrations call into question the mining companies' data on the amount of mercury emissions coming from their smokestacks.

Dan Randolph, executive director of Great Basin Mine Watch, which is releasing the report jointly with other environmental organizations, said the findings imply that the company reports "are not necessarily accurate."

"What we're calling for is the state to revise its regulations to include more of this type of monitoring," he said. "Ultimately, we want to see the mercury releases reduced, but at the minimum, let's find out the

**Something's in the air:  
Mercury from Nevada  
mines a possible source of  
pollution downwind**

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scale of the problem."

A spokesman for the Nevada Mining Association questioned whether the survey is accurate because it was conducted for so little cost. "It can be done cheaply, but what is the degree of confidence in the results?" association President Russ Fields said.

Authors of the UNR report conducted the tests with an off-the-shelf detection device rented for \$5,000 a month. They said the Environmental Protection Agency has given high marks to the Zeeman mercury analyzer, which demonstrates that measurements can be taken cheaply and accurately.

Monitoring of Nevada mines began as a voluntary effort in 2001. Mining companies, the state and the EPA agreed to the testing and to steps to reduce mercury emissions after Nevada emerged as a hot spot for the pollutant.

The industry says that emissions were reduced far more than the initial 33 percent goal in the following years.

But last year, the state launched a stepped-up effort, requiring annual reporting from more than 20 Nevada mines. Mines are required to report the level once a year, on each plant's dirtiest emission day. The readings are taken at the smokestacks only.

Saying that more frequent testing would be costly for the industry, the state is using a \$360,000 federal grant to search for better ways to measure downwind mercury levels.

Samples for the UNR study were taken standing outside the gates of mines, in parking lots or on access roads last August. The work followed a similar study in 2005 by the Idaho Conservation League.

At three of the 10 mines tested, airborne mercury was at or below the level that occurs naturally in the environment - about 5 nanograms per cubic meter.

At four others, the levels were at least several times higher than the 5-nanogram mark. Near active leech heaps, which are not measured under the state program, researchers found levels as high as 60 nanograms.

At three other mines, the levels were sharply higher.

More than a mile away from Newmont Mining's Twin Creeks mine, the readings showed mercury at nearly 700 nanograms - double the federal limits for toxic exposure.

At a parking lot outside Coeur's Rochester mine, mercury was recorded at 2,326 nanograms.

A parking lot at Glamis Gold's Marigold mine registered 3,139 nanograms.

Mike Abbot, a mercury air emissions expert at the U.S. government's Idaho National Lab, said that mercury readings of between 2,000 and 4,000 nanograms, taken near one of the nation's remaining chlor-alkali plants in Louisiana, are among the highest recorded in the United States.

He said a high reading would be "any time you get over 1,000." In his field work, where he measures mercury pollution that is falling on rural Idaho, the most he has ever measured is 160.

Fields said the industry wants to give the new state program a chance.

"Let's see how well it does work," Fields said. "The industry isn't going to object to additional testing if it's shown additional testing is needed."

Dante Pistone, a spokesman for the Nevada environmental protection division, said the state does not agree that the mines should conduct more frequent and varied tests.

"We feel comfortable that given the opportunity, these regulations will work," Pistone said. "It's just a matter of giving them time."

Environmentalists have called for quarterly testing at the smokestacks and sporadic testing downwind.

Airborne mercury is among the most toxic forms of the substance because it is inhaled. It can cause memory loss, tremors and other neurological damage. Women can pass along the toxin to a developing fetus, resulting in brain damage, and children are especially susceptible.

Idaho and Utah activists suspect Nevada's mines are responsible for the high levels in its waterways and fish.

Justin Hayes, a program director at the Idaho Conservation League, said the mercury readings recorded by UNR suggest that the companies' measurements at the smokestack are too low.

His own report last year set off alarms when he found mercury readings half as high as those in the new report.

"No one imagined you'd see them so high," he said. "The situation is not getting any better over there."

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